

VZCZCXR05603
PP RUEHDE RUEHDIR
DE RUEHAD #0892/01 2201331
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 071331Z AUG 08
FM AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1298
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ABU DHABI 000892

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/07/2018

TAGS: PREL PHUM IS AE

SUBJECT: SPECIAL ENVOY RICKMAN HIGHLIGHTS NEED FOR TOLERANCE TO COMBAT ANTI-SEMITISM

Classified by Charge d'Affaires Martin Quinn, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

(U) This is a joint Abu Dhabi - Dubai cable.

Summary

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism Gregg Rickman took the opportunity of a July 21-24 visit to the UAE to stress the need for tolerance, interfaith engagement, and a balanced portrayal of Jews in the press and media. Citing examples of anti-Semitism and the damage done by biased representations of another's faith, he stressed the distinction between political satire and religious intolerance, asking interlocutors to help spread a message of interfaith engagement. Interlocutors shared views on (their perceived) high levels of tolerance in the Arab media, Arab-Israeli engagement on the economic front, and the hope of enhanced cooperation between faiths.

¶2. (C) Comments follow in the order that meetings were held. SEAS Rickman was told that UAE economic engagement with Israel was already underway, albeit quietly. Officials from Al Arabiya cited their networks pioneering work in moderating speech by hosting Israeli officials on-air, avoiding the religiously-loaded term "martyr" when describing "Arabs killed by Israelis," building bridges rather than combating western media. (One lamented that the recent prisoner swap had made heroes of Hezbollah, contrary to the Al Arabiya goal of combating extremism.) In a discussion of Jews in Iran, the Iran Regional Presence Office (IRPO) Director noted that restrictions placed on Iran's Jews are not significantly different than restrictions placed on the population at large, that the Iranian Jewish community does not have a cohesive political agenda, and that IRPO seeks ongoing contacts through which to monitor conditions in Iran.

¶3. (C) Director of the Zayed House for Islamic Culture explained Islamic traditions of tolerance, a theme echoed by the MFA. Emirati tolerance has developed over centuries of trade with outsiders of diverse religious persuasion, said MFA's Ambassador Al Zarouni, and continues today as the UAE hosts millions of guest workers without interfering in their religious practices. Deflecting the question of building a synagogue in the UAE, Zarouni said the UAE had no Jewish population and cited peace between Israel and Palestine as a prerequisite to full normalization which might facilitate the building of a Jewish house of worship. The Director General of the National Media Council stressed that criticism of Israel is political and not anti-Jewish -- UAE law forbids attacks on the heavenly religions. He also took issue with the word "anti-Semitism," suggesting that a full resolution to intolerance towards the Semitic peoples must address bias against the Arabs. End summary.

Dubai School of Government

¶4. (C) During a wide-ranging discussion at the Dubai School of Government, visiting Fellow Jim Krane mused that on economic issues the UAE and Israel work together, albeit quietly. He said many Israelis are active traders on the Dubai Diamond Exchange, for example, although he speculated most are likely dual nationals entering/departing the UAE on their non-Israeli passports. He also

pointed out a recent joint venture between DPWorld (a subsidiary of parastatal Dubai World) and Israel's Zim Ports (a subsidiary of Zim Integrated Shipping Services) to acquire Contarsa, the container terminal operator at Spain's Tarragona Port.

MBC Group and Al Arabiya

¶15. (SBU) Emphasizing efforts to advance a moderate message on Israel, Al Arabiya Program Editor Antoine Aoun described how Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC, the parent organization of Al Arabiya) started breaking taboo's in 1991 by becoming the first Arab network to host Israeli officials on-air. He noted the network's policy to avoid the term "martyr" when describing "Arabs killed by Israelis," contrary to the common practice in Arab press and media, stressing Al Arabiya's desire to deliver moderate messages which do not "give a very big space to the extremists." Mazen Hayek, Group Director of Marketing, PR and Commercial, said MBC's goal is to build bridges, adding that MBC was the first network to bring American news and programming to the Arab TV screen.

¶16. (SBU) Najib Bencherif, Head of Assignments at Al Arabiya, commented that fighting extremism and fanaticism is, in effect, fighting against anti-Semitism. While acknowledging anti-Semitism in the Arab world, he insisted that Al Arabiya's job is "not to include it in our reporting." He said the news channel has two Arab-Israeli correspondents and one producer covering Israel-Palestinian issues from Jerusalem.

¶17. (C) Turning to the recent Israeli-Hezbollah prisoner exchange, Hayek (a Lebanese national) bemoaned the exclusion of the Lebanese government from the exchange, opining that Israel had effectively

ABU DHABI 00000892 002 OF 003

made Hezbollah "into heroes" in the eyes of the Lebanese street, reversing, in his opinion, what had been a downward spiral in public opinion regarding Hezbollah.

Iran's Jewish Population

¶18. (C) Iran Regional Presence Office Director Ramin Asgard emphasized that irrespective of Iranian President Ahmadinejad's grandstanding on Israel, restrictions placed on the Iranian Jewish community are not significantly different than restrictions placed on the population at large. (Note: Jews constitute roughly 25-30,000 of the 60 million Iranian population and are demographically similar to the overall population, i.e., predominantly under 30 years of age. End note.) While there are limits on school matriculation, high level government and military jobs, etc., these same restrictions are generally felt by all minority populations in Iran (with the Ba'hai bearing the brunt of uniquely onerous restrictions). Furthermore, the Iranian Jewish community does not currently have a cohesive political agenda based upon its Jewish identity, and tends to be generally nationalistic in its views on regional issues.

¶19. (C) The MP representing Iran's Jewish community, Morris Motamed, has nonetheless spoken out forcefully when the Iranian government has made negative statements about Jewish history and culture - including a press conference he called to specifically condemn President Ahmadinejad's comments on the Holocaust. (Note: Motamed has been a primary contact for IRPO's monitoring of conditions for the Jewish community in Iran. He was replaced this year upon the election of Siamak Morsadegh, with whom IRPO has not yet made contact but will continue to reach out to. End note.) Asgard noted that IRPO closely monitors the conditions of the Jewish community and other religious minorities as part of our mandate to draft the annual International Religious Freedom Report and Human Rights Report.

Zayed House for Islamic Culture

¶10. (U) In the traditional inland town of Al Ain, Khaled Al Marzouki, Director General of the Zayed House for Islamic Culture, explained that his center had originally opened in 1983 to welcome new converts to Islam but in 2005 its mission was expanded to include

outreach to non-Muslims and cultural and Arabic language instruction to the increasing expatriate population. The center also provides specialized programs, which in the past have included a six-week training opportunity in 2007 for a delegation of American Imams. Asked how Zayed House addresses Jewish issues, Marzouki said "we don't talk about Jews specifically--but about all religions." He continued: "All religions on earth are humans and brothers. We tell people [you] must deal with them as [you] deal with Muslims." He said teachings sought to avoid "the impression that there is a difference between us and them."

MFA

¶11. (SBU) MFA's Ali Al Zarouni, former Ambassador to Germany and current Director of the Office of American and European Affairs, emphasized the Emirati, Arab, and Islamic traditions of tolerance toward Jews and Judaism. Zarouni explained that Emirati tolerance has developed over centuries of trade with outsiders of diverse religious persuasion (including Hindus with which Islam has little in common). The economic necessity of tolerance continues today with the millions of guest workers living in the UAE (who he noted are not asked to identify their religion upon entry to the UAE). Zarouni went so far as to attribute the UAE's prosperity to its tolerance of foreigners and their ways.

¶12. (SBU) Citing the prophet Mohammed's many teachings about tolerance and caring for Christian and Jewish brethren, Zarouni said these included the Prophet's comment to his wife before eating: "Did you send food to our Jewish neighbor?" Mohammed prohibited his followers from killing Jews, continued Zarouni, and many caliphs had Jewish advisors. Islamic history unfolds with Muslims friendly to their non-Muslim colleagues most of the time. (Comment: Zarouni filled much of the meeting with historic examples of Islamic tolerance of Jews rather than citing specific examples from the present or from the UAE. End comment).

¶13. (C) Asked about the possibility of a synagogue in the UAE, Zarouni responded that there was not a Jewish community here, noting that Abu Dhabi has a Hindu temple and numerous Christian churches (to which the government appports land free of charge) to service the non-Muslim expatriate community. Pressed again about a synagogue, Zarouni reiterated generalities of Islam's tolerance of Jews, but then said: "We have to first work for the peace process between Palestine and Israel. This will lead to the normalizing of the whole thing. Maybe then you will bring your family and have a synagogue here."

National Media Council

ABU DHABI 00000892 003 OF 003

¶14. (SBU) Ibrahim Al Abed, Director General of the National Media Council (and thus a media gate-keeper), stressed that any criticism of Israel in the UAE was political and not directed toward Jews. He claimed an absence of anti-Jewish or anti-Judaism material in the press, while acknowledging criticism of Israel and Zionism. In fact, he said, he said UAE law does not permit press attacks on the three "heavenly" religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). Reminded that opposition to Zionism can easily slip into the realm of anti-Jewish and therefore become anti-Semitic, Al Abed chose to disagree. He cited a Muslim statement from the recent Saudi-sponsored interfaith dialogue conference in Spain explaining that opposition to Zionism is a political matter and that Muslims have nothing against the Jewish people or religion.

¶15. (SBU) Al Abed also took issue with the word "anti-Semitism," as others had done, claiming that Arabs are also Semitic and questioning whether the Special Envoy would investigate anti-Arabism. Al Abed suggested that the best way to combat anti-Semitism would be to broaden its scope to include intolerance of Arabs, as he saw the issue more as one of hatred and scapegoating than one of anti-Jewishness alone. Al Abed reiterated that the UAE press is often critical of Israel (as are many foreign papers widely read in the UAE) but not of Jews or Judaism, and that the UAEG would not

censor this material. Similarly, European papers did not censor cartoons of the prophet Mohammed. However, the UAE would not allow its press to incite extremism or terrorism, he concluded.

Comment

¶16. (SBU) The Special Envoy's visit was an opportunity to emphasize the importance of religious tolerance, with a focus on countering anti-Semitic portrayals in the media, education, and commerce. UAE interlocutors, while sharing forthright views suggesting confidence that tolerance was already at an acceptable level, were nonetheless reminded of the need for ongoing vigilance in keeping public discourse free of hate speech and religious bias. End comment.

¶17. (U) SEAS Rickman approved this message.

QUINN